Social Constructivism:
The Reason Why Two Heads Are Better Than One

Social constructivism is a method of teaching that emphasizes collaboration and social interaction. Lev Vygotsky, often considered the “father” of social constructivism believed that social interaction was an integral part of learning. He believed that learning does not just take place within the individual. He argued that learning is a social and collaborative activity where people create meaning through their interactions with one another. There are many different components to this theory, which will be discussed below.

Zone of proximal development, or ZPD. ZPD has been described as a zone where learning occurs when a child is helped by others with learning a concept in the classroom. In short, students can, with the help of instructors or more advanced peers, master concepts and skills they cannot master on their own. The instructor or advanced peer serves as the guide by helping to clarify concepts and aid in solving problems particular to individual and group needs.

A good instructor does not just assign work or provide answers. He or she is able to foster a helpful learning environment by asking relevant questions and promoting discovery. Guidance and support are provided for tasks that are beyond the students’ capability, until they can complete the tasks on their own.

As teachers, we need to ensure that classroom activities are not too easy for our students, or conversely, way over their heads. We want to be in that zone of proximal development.

Scaffolding. Scaffolding is an assisted learning process that supports the ZPD, or getting to the next level of understanding with the assistance of teachers, peers or other adults. For example, when a child learns to say the alphabet alone he may miss a letter; however, if a teacher hums the alphabet song and points to the letters with them, the child can then say the alphabet correctly by themselves. Fostering student independence is central to successful scaffolding; therefore, the scaffold must eventually be removed to allow the learner to apply new learning independently.

Instructional scaffolds may take various forms, depending on the needs and strengths of learners. As teachers, we need to build various scaffolds into our instruction. So instead of saying, “Read the U.S. Constitution and then write an essay about how a bill becomes a law in the United States,” think about how you might scaffold your instruction and plan activities that will make the lawmaking process easier for your students to understand.

Cooperative learning. According to Vygotsky, cooperative learning is an integral part of creating deeper understanding. Students should not only work with teachers one-on-one, but they should also work with other students, who have a lot to offer one another. Vygotsky is a firm believer that social interaction and cultural influences have a huge effect on a student and how learning occurs. Learning does not occur in a vacuum. Various perspectives on material could open up completely new and exciting opportunities for a student.

As teachers, we can create classroom experiences for students to collaborate with each other to construct internalization of knowledge. We should also recognize the diversity of the class and embrace student differences. We can promote dialogue of the material so that students can critically think about and discuss what they are learning. If they think critically, they will walk away with personal meaning that was constructed on their own.

To embrace diversity, students must interact socially. Because participants bring their own backgrounds, views, and experiences to the learning context, their social interaction allow for multiple perspectives on the content and numerous representations of reality. In addition, collaboration with diverse others can be a vehicle for developing an appreciation of personal and cultural differences.

References:

Spotlight NOLA

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans public schools were considered by many to be amongst the worst in the nation. In 2003, legislation was passed granting the state of Louisiana and its newly formed Recovery School District the right to take over individual schools that were performing poorly. This legislation was contentious, as it meant taking control of these schools from the local parish and giving it instead to the larger state of Louisiana.

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, it was decided that instead of controlling a handful of poorly performing schools, the state-run Recovery School District would be given control of more than 100 of New Orleans’ schools, leaving the local Orleans Parish School Board with less than 20 schools under their jurisdiction.

Now, over a decade later, legislation has been passed which has put control of New Orleans schools back in the hands of the local Orleans Parish School Board. You can read more about this issue in these media links:
- New York Times
- The Times-Picayune
- WWLTV

TPCP is offering a FREE PD on Cooperative Learning
February 15, 2017. Visit the following link for more info and registration:
www.apeleducators.org/event/tulane

There are many technology tools to assist you in facilitating collaboration in your classroom.

The site below might be a great place to start your search:
Twenty Fun Free Tools for Interactive Classroom Collaboration

written by: Dr. Brooke Grant and Dr. Vicki Templet
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www.apeleducators.org/event/tulane